Upstream spring rise postponed by corps

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A race to save a native Missouri River resident from extinction was slowed Wednesday when the Army Corps of Engineers said it would postpone an upstream spring rise because of inadequate snowpack in the Rocky Mountains.

Scientists with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service believe warm water releases over the emergency spillway at Fort Peck Dam in Montana would provide reproductive cues and habitat for endangered pallid sturgeon that have spawned without success for decades in the Missouri River.

"The pallid sturgeon is the Missouri River's oldest resident and this population is right at the end of its reproductive life," said Mike Olson, Missouri River coordinator for the USFWS in Bismarck. "It's a one-year setback that we can live with, we can get over it. We just hope that next year provides better snowpack."

Larry Cieslik, with the corps in Omaha, Neb., said mountain snowpack, which accounts for 80 percent of the runoff into the Missouri River system, is a disappointing 60 percent of average. Fort Peck Reservoir is 12 feet lower than what is average for this time of the year.

"It is highly unlikely the snowpack will provide sufficient water to raise the lake's level high enough to allow adequate releases over the emergency spillway to conduct this test this year," Cieslik said.

Even if significant and timely snow and rains do come, elevating spring runoff

higher than anticipated, the spring rise out of Fort Peck will not take place, said Larry Murphy, with the corps in Omaha.

"The decision has been made," he said.

Murphy said a decision such as this one has to be made well in advance because of the amount of planning and coordination involved.

The spring rise out of Peck, or "mini test," called for warm water discharges of up to 11,000 cubic feet per second over the emergency spillway, combined with varying cold water powerhouse flows, for a total discharge of 15,000 cfs per day during June. June flows average 9,000 cfs per day.

Releasing warmer water over the emergency spillway at Fort Peck will provide native species, including the pallid sturgeon, with an environment that more closely resembles river conditions before the dam was built.

"If we can improve the habitat below Fort Peck, it improves the natives species' cue to spawn," said Steve Krentz, pallid sturgeon recovery team leader for the USFWS in Bismarck. "With the (warm water) release, it will give us 180 miles of improved habitat. That's pretty significant."

Now, scientists believe, the pallid sturgeon is unable to find the right temperature of water to spawn in.

Fortunately, Krentz said, the USFWS has been able to augment the aging sturgeon population with hatchery-raised young.

"We're not at the end of the road yet, but it's definitely a pain to have to set things back one year," he said. "It's a race."

The test of modified flows out of Fort Peck

is the result of talks between the corps and the USFWS concerning the impact of the operation of Missouri River dams on the pallid sturgeon and two species of sandbar-nesting birds.

Larry Murphy, with the corps in Omaha, said the runoff forecast for the Missouri River is projected at 21.5 million acre feet, up from last spring's 16.5 maf total. Figured into this spring's runoff, however, is the forecast of additional precipitation in either the form of snow or rain. Average runoff is 25.2 maf.

"It's pretty bad now," he said. "But, typically, mountain snowpack doesn't peak until April 15, so we could see some change."

Downstream of Fort Peck, Sakakawea is expected to reach 1,831.5 feet above mean sea level, about a 10-foot drop in average pool elevation for the big lake at that time of the year.

"We really want things to turn around," Murphy said.

But no one is holding their breath.

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